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AUTHOR Canillas, Gregorio J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a review of the literature on African-American men and the psychotherapeutic process as a coping style. It describes the demographics of African-American men in treatment, reasons for seeking treatment, and common issues being presented in the psychotherapeutic session. Research suggesting that African-American men underutilize mental health services is presented, along with more recent research which suggests that African-American men do seek treatment for work-related issues and depression. Many of these issues are related to unconscious conflicts concerning passivity and aggression, and that many African-American men reported racism to be a causative factor in the development of their problems. It is hypothesized that African-American men enter treatment as a result of the impact of a racist society and/or to develop more effective coping mechanisms. This paper explores adaptive coping mechanism utilized by African-American men. The important of understanding the impact of the social, political, and economic environment on developing adaptive coping mechanisms in African-American men is highlighted. Ways to help African-American men develop adaptive coping mechanisms are considered. It is recommended that future research focus on adaptive coping mechanisms used by this population as they have significant implications for the treatment of African-American men. (NB)

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African American Men: Psychotherapeutic Process as a Coping Style

Gregorio J. Canillas

California School of Professional Psychology, Los Angeles

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RUNNING HEAD: COPING STYLE

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Abstract

This paper will focus on a literature review on African American men and the psychotherapeutic process as a coping style. The paper will describe the demographics of African American men in treatment, as well as the reasons for seeking treatment and common issues being presented in the psychotherapeutic session. Research on demographics of males in psychotherapy have found that African American men underutilize mental health services. However, recent research findings (Jones & Gray, 1984; Jones, Gray, & Jospitre, 1982) report that African American men seek treatment for work-related issues and depression. Jones and his colleagues (1982;1984) found that many of these issues were related to unconscious conflicts that centered around issues of passivity and aggression. In addition, many African American men reported that racism was a causative factor in the development of these problems. These findings provide important information about successful men who are seeking treatment to either augment or replace their previous coping styles.

The author hypothesizes that African American men enter treatment as the result of the impact of a racist society and/or to develop more effective coping mechanisms. This presentation will explore adaptive coping mechanisms utilized by African American men. In addition, the importance of understanding the impact of the social, political, and economic environment on developing adaptive coping mechanisms in African American men will be highlighted. Furthermore, the author will also discuss ways in which to help African American men to develop adaptive coping mechanisms.

In addition, past research has failed to investigate successful coping styles used by African American men. Future research should undoubtedly focus on adaptive coping mechanisms used by this population as they have significant implications for the treatment of African American men.

African American Men: Psychotherapeutic Process as a Coping Style

During the past two decades, racial influences on the therapeutic process, particularly amongst African American clients has received much attention in psychological literature-with a marked increase in both theoretical and empirical articles (Jones, 1985; Mitchell-Jackson, 1983; Thomas & Dansby, 1985). However, there appear to be very few studies that focus on the influences that race and gender have on the types of coping mechanisms utilized by African American males. Thus, researchers have failed to highlight the successful coping mechanisms that African American males have used to resourcefully negotiate their way through problems that they might encounter in their daily lives. In this paper, the author will 1) highlight some of the stressors encountered by African American men, 2) explore some of the culturally specific coping mechanisms being utilized by African American men, 3) look at the literature that examines the utilization of psychotherapeutic resources by African American men, 4) propose possible treatment goals and interventions which may possibly serve to increase the numbers of African American men who utilize psychotherapeutic interventions, and 5) highlight possible future research directions for the study of the African American male.

The Impact of the Sociocultural Environment

It is important for the mental health professional who is working with the African American male to be sensitive to the conditions in which racial and gender influences develop. The therapist must recognize the complexity and impact of cultural and gender milieus and how these social forces impact the African American males reality. Pickney (1984) notes that both attitudinal and institutional racism have been persistent despite the gains of the civil rights movement, and that the past decade has narrowed opportunities for African Americans. Pickney (1984) states that while there has been a decline in attitudinal racism, the prevalence of institutional racism has increased, possibly in response to the successes of African Americans following the civil rights movement. While there are issues that effect all African Americans, such as employment issues, issues related to marginalization, obtaining in education, etc., some issues have been unique to the African American males experience. These issues include: issues related to masculinity, fatherhood, providing for oneself and family, etc. For the most part, racism (both institutional and in some cases attitudinal) has served to attempt to eliminate African American men from the African American men from the African American community and/or to render to Black man ineffective in carrying out their roles as husband, provider, etc. (Gary, 1984). For example, it may be noted that institutional racism

has lead to differential access to goods, services, power, and wealth accumulation amongst males.

Adaptive Coping Mechanisms Utilized by African American Men

While there has been very little research on the African American male and the psychotherapeutic process or on the types of adaptive coping mechanisms employed by African American men--there have been several research studies that have focused on successful coping strategies used by the collective African American community. Researchers (Berry & Blassingame, 1982; White, 1984) have documented that there have been several coping mechanisms that have been specific to the African American experience and the result of a history of oppression. White (1984) notes that these coping mechanisms represent the resiliency, emotional vitality, and sense of renewal that is rooted in the African American cultural heritage. For example, White (1984) notes that the African American church and the extended family network have been amongst the most important and frequently used coping mechanisms employed by African Americans.

Gary (1984) has noted that African American men have used a variety of informal and formal networks to cope with their daily stressors. He cites the use of social or civic clubs, fraternal organizations, barbershops, religion, and sports groups as possible support networks for African American males to use as an emotional

outlet and coping mechanism. Unfortunately, there appear to be no empirical articles to support such theoretical conclusions.

In looking at formal networks, African American men may be using psychotherapy as a positive coping mechanism in which to explore the unique issues encountered by African American males.

Research on the demographics of males in psychotherapy has found that African American men underutilized mental health services. However, researchers and theoreticians have failed to investigate the reasons for the low numbers of African Americans males who utilize mental health services. The majority of articles that focus on African American adults and utilization of psychotherapy generally highlights the community as a whole (Jones, 1985; Mitchell-Jackson, 1983; Thomas & Dansby, 1985). These researchers have noted that estrangement of African Americans from mental health services is largely due to the racism that has been a longstanding tradition in the field of psychology. Neighbors (1984) noted that African Americans also may not perceive certain types of services as beneficial or may use other professional services (i.e. a minister) that is reflective of African American cultural beliefs.

In two articles (Jones & Gray, 1984; Jones, Gray, & Jospitre, 1982) surveyed African American and White psychiatrists who were treating African American males and females. The survey focused on common presenting problems, treatment problems, and unconscious conflict areas. The researchers found that the most

common problems presented in psychotherapy by African American men focused on marriage, family, and depression. The researchers found that the most common problems presented in psychotherapy by African American men focused on marriage, family, and depression. The most common treatment problems encountered by the therapist centered on developing new coping mechanisms, working toward change, helping the client to gain psychological insight, and engaging the client in the therapeutic process. In addition, they also found that the most common unconscious conflicts focused on issues related to success/failure, high/low self-esteem, and aggression/passivity. Jones et al. (1982;1984) notes that problems with aggression and passivity may result because the African American male does not have an outlet in which he may deal with such issues.

Jones and colleagues (1982; 1984) listed several factors that contribute to the successful treatment of African American males. These factors included supportiveness, patience, tolerance, and the ability to listen empathetically.

Furthermore, racism was also listed as a causative factor of the pathology or served to exacerbate the symptoms presented in treatment by the African American male. Jones et al. (1982; 1984) concluded that the therapist must be knowledgeable about the manner in which social forces (such as racism) impact the lives of African American men.

Possible Treatment Goals and Strategies

When considering how to address these unique issues in psychotherapy, the clinician must first note that African American men are not a heterogeneous group. Indeed, the issues presented in treatment by some African American men may not be similar to those presented by other African American males. In developing a treatment plan for the African American male, the following plan--which includes for treatment goals may be helpful. However, because of the heterogeneity some of African American men may only need to work on one or two of the four goals. The first goal of the treatment should be to help the African American male to understand how the larger society impacts him. This would include helping the African American male to gain understanding to how racism and racist institutions impact his life. The second goal should be to foster greater knowledge about self (both in terms of personal and racial identity). Furthermore, the third goal should be to validate the African American man's sense of racial/cultural pride, and the fourth goal should be to empower the client to make internal and external changes in his life.

In addition, Griffith (1977) notes that psychotherapy is not a culture free activity, and that cultural variables impact the treatment in ways that parallel their oppression in society. Griffith (1977) further postulates that because of the difference in African American and White culture, these differences should be attended to in

psychotherapy. He notes that a position that denies or ignores the influence of cultural factors is countertherapeutic. In addition, he notes that in order to effectively treat ethnic minorities the clinician should attempt to maximize his or her knowledge and awareness of cultural and gender-specific issues. He also notes that this is important in order to increase rapport and to facilitate the therapeutic alliance.

Future research questions

For two decades, African American psychologist have proposed theoretical Afrocentric models in treating African Americans. These Afrocentric models are based in Afrocentric or an African-influenced world view which focuses on group interdependence, flexibility, respect for family, culture, and self-actualization. Unfortunately, as of yet no empirical articles exist that support the use of these models.

The psychotherapeutic process is an extremely personal interaction that is influenced by a number of variables. This literature review has sought to highlight some of the influences of race and gender on the process. However, the effects of racism and gender on African American men remain largely unexamined. Future research questions should focus on the empirical analysis of the successful coping mechanisms that African American men use

to deal with problems encountered in daily life. In addition, future research should also focus on the impact of racism on presenting problems, treatment concerns, and unconscious conflicts presented by African American men. In addition, future research should also focus on the type of treatment that is best suited for the unique issues presented by African American men by looking at what effective therapist are doing with their clients. In summary, researchers need to study psychotherapy and whether the African world views

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